

Symposium on Liam Shields'  
*Just Enough: Sufficiency as a Demand  
of Justice*

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# Introduction

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Most people would agree that a world in which some people are starving and others take champagne showers is unjust. But is this unjust because some people have too little or because they have (much) less than someone else? This question has long played a role in public debates about redistribution, poverty, and the welfare state; is it insufficiency or inequality (or both) that matters? More recently, the notion that social justice is achieved when no-one has too little, and everyone has enough, has come into vogue in political philosophy. A *sufficientarian* view of justice,<sup>1</sup> thus, now proposes a distinct alternative to prioritarian, egalitarian, libertarian, utilitarian and other conceptions of justice.

In its original form, sufficientarianism entails that justice, or morality, is concerned with securing “enough” of the relevant distributive currency rather than aiming for an equal distribution of benefits. This notion underpins what Frankfurt termed, the “doctrine of sufficiency” (Frankfurt 1987). The doctrine is grounded in the belief that what matters is people’s absolute levels of opportunity and well-being and not their standing relative to others. As Raz famously noted, it is “the hunger of the hungry, the need of the needy, the suffering of the ill, and so on”, with which morality is concerned (Raz 1986: 240). Justice, thus argued, is not upset by the mere fact that people are worse off than others.

The doctrine of sufficiency, as first developed, however, was met with some powerful objections. In particular, it became apparent that the not giving any weight to inequalities above the threshold seemed untenable (Casal 2007; Holtug 2007). While most theories of justice would agree that getting people above some critical threshold is of significant importance,

1 See Sen 1979; Frankfurt 1987; Crisp 2003; Benbaji 2005; Casal 2007; Huseby 2010; Gosseries 2011; Axelsen and Nielsen 2015; Fourie and Rid 2016; Shields 2016.

few seemed willing to accept the claim that inequalities above this threshold are of no concern to justice. But, as Paula Casal argued, for sufficientarianism to be a distinct view, it must hold both of these claims; both the positive thesis, that it is of special significance to get people above the threshold, but also the negative thesis, that once everybody is above the threshold, no further redistributive demands apply (Casal 2007).

Several philosophers have developed sufficientarianism to better cope with this critique. Some suggest multiple thresholds “vertically” at different levels of well-being, thereby making it less implausible that distributive demands do not apply above the “higher” threshold (Benbaji 2005; Huseby 2010). Others suggest multiple threshold “horizontally”, applied to every distinct relevant dimension of value, so that to be above the threshold in a relevant sense is to be above all such thresholds (Axelsen and Nielsen 2015). Yet others develop sufficientarianism into a hybrid-view by combining the positive thesis with other distributive principles above the threshold (Fourie and Rid 2016).

Liam Shields’ *Just Enough: Sufficiency as a Demand of Justice* (2016) is a new contribution to these theoretical debates, with the merit of applying the theoretical framework to concrete questions such as upbringing, education and global justice. Its main ambition is to rescue sufficientarianism from “the indifference above the threshold objection”, mentioned above, and what we might call “the threshold fetishism objection”. Stated formally, the two objections look like this:

O1: It is implausible to be indifferent about the way benefits and burdens are shared once individuals have secured enough.

O2: It is implausible to permit benefitting those that are *just* below the threshold by tiny amounts instead of benefitting those that are worst off by very large but insufficient amounts.

The first objection applies to what Shields calls “upper-limit sufficientarianism”, or the idea that once everyone has enough, there are no other requirements of distributive justice. The second applies to “headcount sufficientarianism”, stating that we should maximize the amount of people having enough. According to Shields, all existing versions of sufficientarianism fall into these two categories and either are vulnerable to these decisive objections or must be revised in a way that does not make them distinct anymore from other conceptions of justice.

Fortunately for sufficientarians, there seems to be a way out of this, which requires combining the two following theses as Shields recommends:

*The Positive Thesis:* We have weighty non-instrumental reasons to

secure at least enough of some good(s).

*The Shift Thesis:* Once people have secured enough, there is a discontinuity in the rate of change of the marginal weight of our reasons to benefit them further.

This revised sufficientarian view avoids O1 because it is not indifferent towards inequalities above the threshold – it just affirms a discontinuity in the weight of our reasons to benefit people once the threshold is reached. And it avoids O2 because the shift assigns priority to benefiting those who do not have enough.

The argumentation for the two theses follows two distinct lines. The first consists in identifying “sufficientarian reasons”. These are “weighty, non-instrumental, non-egalitarian and satiable” reasons. Wherever we identify such reasons, there is a shift and hence there is room for a sufficientarian principle. For example, as Shields argues in the third chapter, one condition of freedom is a sufficient degree of individual autonomy, understood as “the ideal of living one’s life in accordance with one’s own authentic judgments”. Without this capacity, there is no freedom; hence it is required by justice. Does this mean that we should not promote autonomy beyond the minimum level required for freedom? No, it just means that once sufficient autonomy is secured, claims to further promote autonomy must be made on different grounds than making freedom possible.

The second line of argument consists in identifying debates in which sufficientarian principles can help solve clashes of values. Wherever there are two values, interests or claims that clash, the sufficientarian solution will be to state that once one value, interest or claim is sufficiently satisfied, the other value, interest or claim becomes relatively more important. One example is upbringing, where the interests of children often clash with the interests of (prospective) parents. On this issue, Shields argues in the fifth chapter that the child’s interests have priority over the parents’ interests until they are met to a sufficient extent. Hence, as long as parents provide a good enough upbringing (which is in the child’s interest), they should not lose the child’s custody. Only if parents did not perform well enough could a change of custody be envisioned. In other words, the child’s interests have priority. However, once a child receives a good enough upbringing, the parent’s interest (in keeping custody) matters more than the child’s interest (in receiving the best possible upbringing).

After having applied a similar reasoning to education and global justice, Shields concludes that the distinctive sufficientarian principles of justice are more plausible than their competitors and even indispensable to a sound and complete theory of justice – a claim assessed by several

contributions to this special issue.

The contributions to this volume cover all the main topics discussed in Shields' book. Two of them focus on Shields' core thesis: the shift thesis. Lasse Nielsen admits that it has some attractions, but is worried about the combination of the principles applying below and above the sufficiency threshold. Either the principle of sufficiency is to be weighed against the principle applying above the threshold, with the risk of downplaying the sufficientarian intuition to a minuscule role, or it has absolute priority and Shields faces objections applying to upper-limit sufficientarianism. Moreover, it seems to Nielsen that Shields' view hardly characterizes as distinctively sufficientarian, as it bears important resemblance with Larry Temkin's pluralist telic egalitarianism. Hence, he finishes his paper with a rehabilitation of upper-limit sufficientarianism – in particular against the "illusion of numbers". Counterfactual examples with numbers, as Shields uses to disqualify the upper limit, can give the false impression that upper-limit sufficientarianism has no objections against some people being  $x$  times better off than others. Yet with a sufficiently high threshold, it will not be possible for some people to fare  $x$  times better than others. They will just have more money, not (many) more opportunities, capabilities or even welfare.

Pierre-Étienne Vandamme is more positively inclined towards the shift thesis. As Shields writes in his conclusion (2016: 199–200), he sees it as an opportunity to reconcile sufficientarian and egalitarian intuitions. For if sufficientarianism is detached from its negative affirmation that inequalities above some threshold do not matter from the point of view of justice, it becomes compatible with (luck) equality (or other principles) above the threshold. Hence, Shields' contribution to the debate illustrates the distinction that should be made between *moral indifference* to inequalities above the threshold and *agnosticism* about these inequalities. Endorsing the agnostic position entails that one defends only a partial theory of justice, which must be completed with another principle (at least). Vandamme then enquires into the reasons one might have to leave aside the question of residual inequalities to focus exclusively on insufficiencies, and he highlights several pragmatic reasons to do so. He concludes with a qualified assessment of pragmatism about justice.

Three contributions then discuss Shields' view on autonomy. Robert Huseby expresses sympathy for the view but raises several clarificatory questions and invites further developments on the understanding of satiability, the relation to the conditions of freedom, and the location of the threshold. For example, if autonomy is satiable, it is not clear that *further* increasing autonomy above the sufficiency level will contribute to making

people better off. Hence, in this respect, the principle of sufficient autonomy looks like an upper-limit sufficiency principle. Perhaps there is a level of autonomy that is sufficient without being equivalent to full autonomy, but Shields gives little specification of what this level would be and such view is exposed to the traditional “arbitrariness” objection to (low) sufficiency thresholds. As Huseby argues, there are several formulations concerning the threshold of sufficient autonomy in Shields’ book, and not all of them point in the same direction.

Christopher Mills is more critical and offers two objections against the principle of sufficient autonomy. First, he argues that Shields’ principle offers less protection for our capacities for autonomous behavior than it should. The reason is that it protects against coercion and other external threats acting on our beliefs, but not against internal threats such as self-deception, or non-interpersonal external threats such as bad luck. Second, he argues that Shields fails to dismiss accounts of how welfare is partly constituted by autonomy (“constitutive welfarism”). These accounts do not tie our capacities for autonomy to our interest in *freedom*, as Shields does, but instead tie both our capacities for autonomy and freedom to our interest in *living good lives*. As a result, they seem better able to protect our authentic decisions against internal threats and non-interpersonal external threats.

Danielle Zwarthoed also discusses the principle of sufficient autonomy, yet in relation with Shields’ views on education. Zwarthoed first challenges Shields’ contention that instrumental accounts of autonomy fail to support mandatory autonomy education in all cases. The reason instrumental accounts can succeed, she argues, is that an adequate level of autonomy might be necessary to live well. Drawing inspiration from Joseph Raz, she claims that a minimal degree of autonomy might be necessary to secure the dependency of a person’s goals on reasons. Otherwise, that person cannot make sure the reasons she has to pursue goals are independently valid and will contribute to her well-being. Zwarthoed then compares the principle of sufficient autonomy with the Rawlsian principle of fair equality of opportunity. Shields argues that, by requiring talents discovery, the principle of sufficient autonomy renders Rawls’ principle of fair equality of opportunity more plausible and should thus supplement it. Yet Zwarthoed points out that the two principles are not necessarily concerned with the same talents, which might bring them in tension in a context of finite educational resources.

Anca Gheaus discusses the issue of upbringing. As mentioned earlier, Shields believes that children are entitled to a sufficiently good upbringing, rather than to the best available one, and that their interests in that trump

the (prospective) parent(s)'s interests in parenting and keeping custody of their child. By so doing, he suggests an appropriate balance between the potentially conflicting interests of children and parents. Gheaus agrees with the conclusion that "adequate parents cannot lose custody merely because a better parent is willing to take over", but rejects Shields' argumentation in favor of a "child-centred" account of the right to parent. Given that parenting entails the possibility to exercise a very significant amount of authority over children, she argues, it seems that the right to parent cannot be grounded on the right-holder. Therefore, unless Shields admits that justice requires equal opportunities to flourish and that parenting is necessary to flourish, which he denies, she claims that he should adopt a child-centred perspective.

Finally, Siba Harb and David V. Axelsen discuss the application of Shields' sufficientarianism to global justice debates. In addition to applying a sufficiency threshold, Shields differentiates between two ways in which our obligations may vary in demandingness: *content* (how much we owe) and *stringency* (how urgent fulfilling the duty is). He believes that this makes possible new ways of conceptualizing our duties of global justice compared with the traditional divide between statists and cosmopolitans. Harb and Axelsen argue that the combination of a sufficiency threshold and a shift in content-demandingness does not produce new viable positions. However, they highlight the conceptual and political benefits of the distinction between content and stringency. The latter means, for example, that someone can be statist *qua* content, i.e. consider that we owe more to compatriots than to foreigners, but cosmopolitan *qua* stringency, i.e. consider that our duties towards foreigners are more urgent. Many other possibilities unfold, with the merit of shifting the lines of divide in global justice debates and bringing more attention to the question of political priority in our duties.

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